

Case Study St Catherine's College

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"I'm not designing for fun. All the nonsense has to go. You cannot save the world with the immensely aestheticizing. It's about function – a significant aspect of the Danish design tradition." – Knud Holscher

After completing his studies at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Danish design icon Knud Holscher started his career under renowned architect and designer Arne Jacobsen in 1958, joining him in his combined home and studio outside Copenhagen. Here, from the 1st floor of Jacobsen's modernist terraced house on Strandvejen, Knud Holscher recalls working with a view over the Øresund strait separating Denmark and Sweden.

At that time, Arne had already gained international acclaim, and young, aspiring architects came from afar to join the studio. "I still receive Christmas cards from two Canadian friends who worked at the studio at the time" says Knud.

Knud's first significant task was working alongside his master on the SAS Royal Hotel – the world's first design hotel and Copenhagen's first skyscraper. All furnishing was made bespoke, including the icon Swan and Egg chairs. "I would see him working on the Egg in his garage on weekends. He had parked his car on the street to make room" Knud recalls.

But not only did Arne and Knud put in hours and hours refining all bespoke solutions, Arne also travelled near and far, collecting unique art work for his projects. "A friend of mine has this beautiful, old print from the middle east hanging on the wall, and he told me he bought it at an auction from the SAS hotel when they started the restoration of the rooms. This was a piece of history."

In 2018, the hotel underwent a large restoration, and only one room is left the way it was at its completion in 1960.

Knud speaks fondly of his former master and fellow designer and recalls his minimal design language and knack for beautiful detailing. "Arne had a marvellous decorative sense. But he was very straight. In the first drawings of St. Catherine's College, I added little balconies to each of the rooms, but Arne wanted to keep it very straightforward. No balconies. This paints a fitting picture of Arne's minimal approach to architecture. Arne's best work was yellow bricks, beautifully proportioned."

Although Arne was a tough mentor at times, he understood the importance of involving his colleagues and interns: "Building houses and architecture is not a one man show. That's one thing I learned from Arne. He did not hand over ready-made concepts, but always asked: "How do we solve this?" and had everyone bring ideas to the table."

After only two years at the studio, Knud was put in charge of a project that would have a major impact on his career. A group of English professors from Oxford visited Copenhagen on a gloomy day in the late 1950s and came out to see Munkegaard School, another one of Arne's great architectural works – "It was pouring down, and the brickwork looked stunning" Knud recalls. The historian Alan Bullock, who was responsible for hiring an architect for the construction of a new campus building at Oxford University, reckoned that it would look just as beautiful in Oxford where the settings and weather is similar to that in Denmark. "Here we have the architect" he concluded, referring to Arne and his team.

Arne and Knud travelled back and forth to oversee construction in Oxford, and after a while, Arne felt it was time to have someone move to Oxford and oversee the construction on-site. And Knud did just that.

St. Catherine's is one of the constituent colleges of the University of Oxford. Its minimal glass and concrete structure looks just as beautiful today as it did at its opening in 1962.

Arne Jacobsen had a concrete wall in his backyard to which he referred when working on St. Catherine's: "This is what it should look like – smooth and slightly glossy".

"It was an incredible education, overseeing such a large project. The first thing I did upon arriving at the construction site was have the workers tear down a wall they had just built. They hadn't done a very thorough job, and this was my opportunity to make a stand".

Situated in the eastern part of Oxford, the modernist buildings feature repetitive schemes of windows broken up by concrete columns and floor-to-ceiling glass panels, combining modern materials such as brick, concrete, glass and

metals. Stretched out in the landscape, the gardens surrounding the college grounds is an integral part of the architecture. The bell tower of the college stands tall above the low architecture of the campus, making it particularly visible.

The college features a library, seminar room, music house, a number of lecture theatres, and a dining hall notable for its concrete roof structure and Cumberland slate floor.

"I remember having a conversation with Arne that turned things around in how we worked together. He said: "draw what you find to be the best solution, and not what you think I find best" and so I did. And from then on we had a lot of dialogues that meant a great deal to me and to him."

Everything was designed by Arne. The chairs (the Swann, the model 3107, the high-back Oxford chairs) as well as lamps, cutlery, clocks. Even hooks and lever handles.

However, Knud struggled to find the latter. Going through stacks of brochures in search of the right solution, Knud wondered why it seemed impossible to find a company that made a collection – a system – of architectural hardware in the same material and finish. Working with Alan Tye, Knud decided to design just that. A line of aluminium hardware that later became the beginning of d line and catapulted him into his successful career as an industrial designer. "I remember coming in to a hotel room in a small provincial town in Nigeria a couple of years later while designing a university in the area, and there I saw my lever handles on the doors."

The family stayed in Oxford for two years, and upon returning to Denmark, Knud felt it was time to embark on new ventures as an architect. He made partner in established architecture firm Krohn & Hartvig Rasmussen, where he, among other things, designed Odense Universitet. This was also the beginning of collaborations with companies such as Ifö, ERCO and dline, who would later be clients of his own design studio, Holscher Design, designing functional everyday solutions, award-winning sanitary wear and architectural hardware.

About his approach to architecture and design, Knud says: "We're designing for the average Dane. It's about a social attitude, about staying humble."

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Extra quotes:

"We're not designing expensive objects; we're designing for the average Dane. It's about a social attitude, about staying humble and not about showing off."

"There are two measures of durability in architecture and design. One is in terms of physical wear and tear, and one is the mental perception – the aesthetics. And the last one is probably the one that is hardest to create and maintain."

"My life and career have been one big competition, but it never felt that way. I always had a blast."